

Games to Live With and Die For: Speculations on NikeFuel

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ABSTRACT

In this presentation I offer an alternative way to look at gamification and quantified-self technologies. These often resemble games, but of a kind that requires no form of play. Quantified-self technologies often play by themselves, and while these are altered by human intervention they do not need continuous attention or significant decisions to keep functioning. The player is only supposed to keep them always up-to-date.

NikeFuel is a significant example of this kind of games. NikeFuel, a technology for the quantification of body movement developed by sports company Nike, is applied in a series of gadgets. The most popular, Nike+, is a wristband which quantifies the movement of the user and converts it into a NikeFuel score, that can be later visualised on a laptop or mobile phone. Moving throughout the day is transformed in a game-like experience, according to the principles of gamification (Deterding et al 2014).

Gamification and quantified-self technologies have been seen for their performative potential and their capacity to control and inform our bodies (Whitson 2015). From a Foucauldian perspective, quantified-self technologies are attempts to rationalise the practices and movements of living organisms, as forms of biopolitical control (Foucault 2005, Schrape 2014). However, these are also spaces of transformation for the conditions under which the self becomes possible. Through NikeFuel, and other cases that I explore in this presentation (Farmville, Cookie Clicker), the player must come to terms with games that act as parasites (Serres 1982) on their own lives.

Thus, I argue that NikeFuel can also be seen to complicate our thoughts about the contemporary digital technologies that surround us on an everyday basis. In this presentation I will argue, possibly counter-intuitively, that gamification and quantified-self technologies are not necessarily tools that we use for a specific purpose; these are technologies we carry around with us and live with. As such, we are transformed by them as much as we transform them. Thus, the problem raised is about how we can co-habit and be hospitable with these games (or refuse the terms of this co-habitation and oppose to them).

In the work of the anthropologist Roger Caillois we can find potentially novel ways of looking at these games that have no purpose, that end by eliminating the player itself. In *Man Play and Games*, Caillois already said that play is often not pleasurable, but is instead 'an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

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money' (1961, 5). Moreover, in texts such *Mimicry and Legendary Pscyhastenia* (1935) Caillois argues that living forms tend to occasionally allow themselves to be assimilated within the surrounding environment, as their own lives could fade and vanish. This instinct, which aims at death while being constitutive of life, is what Caillois defined as 'mimicry'.

I will argue that NikeFuel could be inscribed within a category of quantified-self technologies that is now re-emerging in the contemporary practices of playful design. In these trends, we see the disappearance of play and of the player itself. Agency is lost in favour of an iterative engagement within digital environment where life itself disappears and dissipates, as human being and machine become assimilated with each other. An activity which is much more similar to that of the praying mantis analysed by Caillois (1934): an animal capable of destroying itself in the same act of reproduction and preservation of the species.

NikeFuel is advertised by the sports company as a tool for the measurement and improvement of *life* itself (Nike, Inc. 2013). But it might just as well be a technology that deconstructs the separation and opposition between life and death, as it merges symbiotically with the same living being whose movement is quantified.

Keywords

Gamification, Quantified Self, Governmentality, Caillois, Anthropology, Idle games, Social games

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